

A Time to Appease

Пише: Paul Kennedy
четвртак, 15 јул 2010 08:00

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“APPEASEMENT!” WHAT a powerful term it has become, growing evermore in strength as the decades advance. It is much stronger a form of opprobrium than even the loaded “L” word, since Liberals are (so their opponents charge) people with misguided political preferences; but talk of someone being an Appeaser brings us to a much darker meaning, that which involves cowardice, abandoning one’s friends and allies, failing to recognize evil in the world—a fool, then—or recognizing evil but then trying to buy it off—a knave. Nothing so alarms a president or prime minister in the Western world than to be accused of pursuing policies of appeasement. Better to be accused of stealing from a nunnery, or beating one’s family.

So it is a rather risky enterprise even for an academic to ask, in a scholarly way, whether acts of appeasing a rival might not sometimes be a good thing. You wanted to continue negotiations with Saddam Hussein? Appeaser. To avoid criticizing Chinese policies in Tibet? Appeaser. To wriggle out of Afghanistan? Appeaser. To give in to French air controllers’ wage demands? App . . . Well. Before such abuse of the term gets worse, perhaps we should all take a small History lesson.

Moreover, it seems most appropriate to return to the “appeasement debate” at this moment since we’ve just celebrated the seventieth anniversary of Winston Churchill’s assumption of the office of prime minister of Britain and the Commonwealth. In the evening of May 10, 1940, that pugnacious veteran politician arrived at Buckingham Palace and was asked by King George VI to try to form a new government. Just a short while earlier Neville Chamberlain had tendered the resignation of his administration, brought down by the military disasters in Norway, a large-scale revolt by his own Tory backbenchers and a general public demand for a much more decisive conduct of the war. Churchill assented to the king’s request and left the palace to form his own national coalition government. Appeasement shuffled off stage left, and anti-Appeasement, the ghost of Saint George and “Action This Day,” entered from the right. Auden’s dull, dishonest decade was over. The difference was total: night versus day; evil versus good; weakness versus courage.

BUT WAS the difference really so complete? It served well for wartime propaganda purposes and building public morale. It served again, and very well, for McCarthyite criticisms of “weak” U.S. foreign policies, criticism regarding the loss of China, conduct of the Korean War, the

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do-nothing posturing in Washington after successive Soviet crushings of East European uprisings, the loss of Vietnam and so on. The late and very great diplomatic historian at Harvard Ernest May once composed a slim work entitled *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 1973) with a chapter about false analogies of the Munich story. It is still worth a read, and perhaps no more so than today, when the American political establishment earnestly debates what should be done not only with regard to the imminent policy conundrums (Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and North Korea) but also how to handle the more existential questions of the United States’ power and place in the world (see: rising China).

Before delving into the depths of the 1930s, a few general remarks concerning semantics and historical precedents. There was a time when appeasement was an inoffensive, even a rather positive term. The French word *“l’apaisement,”* from which it probably derives (or the earlier medieval-French *apeser*), meant the satisfying of an appetite or thirst, the bringing of comfort, the cooling of tensions. Even today, *Webster’s* dictionary’s first definition of “appease” is “to bring peace, calm; to soothe,” with the later negative meaning being, well, much later in the entry. Even when it was first employed in political discourse, its meaning was benign; in 1919, hoping to bring Europe from war to peace, Prime Minister David Lloyd George declared that his aim was appeasing the appetites of the peoples of the Continent. That was from a position of strength, not weakness.

Over the centuries, though, some governments have appeased other states out of a sense of vulnerability, or for the purposes of prudence. Thus, many eighteenth-century wars ended inconclusively—often with the surrender of a province or the handing back of captured territories—because statesmen mutually agreed that compromise was a lesser evil than further bloodshed and losses. Once the archconqueror Napoleon was totally defeated by all the other nations in 1813–15, this more moderate temperament returned to Europe. Limited wars, cutting deals, buying off a rival to avoid a conflict were commonplace acts. Even as the great powers entered the twentieth century, one of the most exceptional acts of appeasement, and repeated conciliation, was occurring—yet it is something that very few American pundits on appeasement today seem to know anything about. It was Great Britain’s decision to make a series of significant territorial and political concessions to the rising American Republic.

For example, in 1895 London decided on a diplomatic solution (read: concessions) regarding the disputed Venezuela–British Guiana border they had spent more than five decades arguing over because of the belligerent language coming out of Washington on the side of Caracas. In 1901, the cabinet overruled Admiralty opinion and agreed that Britain would give up its 50 percent share of a future isthmian (i.e., Panama) canal, to which it was perfectly entitled under the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty signed with the United States in 1850 to guarantee the waterway

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remained neutral. In 1903, London outraged Canadian opinion by siding with the U.S. delegates over the contentious Alaska–British Columbia border. Yet another retreat. Kaiser Wilhelm II, who so eagerly reckoned to benefit from an Anglo-American war that distracted his European rival, was bewildered that the British kept giving way—kept appeasing—when it was obvious to most naval observers that the far larger Royal Navy could have spanked the nascent U.S. fleet. London did not see things that way, because it had many other concerns: growing naval challenges from the Continent; a deteriorating situation in the Far East with the Chinese rising up against imperial forces during the Boxer Rebellion; jockeying with France over control of the Nile Valley; a Russian army advancing toward the Hindu Kush and Britain’s shaky Central Asian interests. Far better to buy the American imperialists off, preserve their enormous mutual trade across the Atlantic and save the cost of defending Canada. Sometimes, giving way made sense. In this case, appeasement worked, and arguably played a massive role in helping to bring the United States to an official pro-British stance as the two great wars of the twentieth century approached. Curiously, I have never seen any of our current American neocons and nationalists declare it was a bad thing that Britain essentially surrendered over the isthmian canal, Venezuela, the Bering Sea seal fisheries and the Alaska boundary.

THIS BACKGROUND is surely worth bearing in mind as we approach the Western democracies’ history of turning-the-other-cheek or of outright concessions to the revisionist nations of Japan, Germany and Italy as the 1930s unfolded. The list, we know, is shameful: Manchuria to Japan, Abyssinia for the Italians, the Rhineland to Germany, the Spanish Civil War and resultant rise of authoritarianism, Germany’s repeated violations of the Versailles arms-limitations treaties, the Japanese attack on China proper, the Anschluss, the Munich deal and annexation of the Sudetenland, the march into Prague, Italy’s assault upon Albania (and on the Soviet side, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). Only in September 1939 did Britain and France decide, rather ironically—since Poland had shared a bit in the slice-up of Czechoslovakia in the previous year—that enough was enough when German forces crossed the Polish border, and that war could no longer be avoided.

And yet, hold on, for the historians who research about and teach this story will explain that there is an even-longer list of reasons why it took so long for the worms to turn. As Donald Lammers put it in a book many years ago called *Explaining Munich* (Hoover Institution, 1966) there seem to be so many justifications for Western appeasement policies that the real difficulty would have been to explain why they did not avoid a conflict with the dictators!

A fuller recitation is a tome unto itself of course. The broadest explanation, and surely still the most understandable, was the long shadow cast by the memories and losses of the First World War, a self-inflicted disaster for Europe of such magnitude that it was impossible to imagine that governments would want to go to war again. The hastily sewn-together peace settlements of 1919–1923 did not help, for they left lots of minorities on the “wrong” side of the newly drawn

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borders, all pressing that their complaints be appeased in some future settlement; and this in turn made the great powers who drew those boundaries uneasy, even guilty, about the many inconsistencies in the Treaty of Versailles. If there was any consolation, they thought to themselves, it was that these grievances could now be handled by the new wonder instrument of international politics: the League of Nations. And this despite the fact that it was no more than a shell organization without any military capacities of its own, and that some key larger nations were missing from its membership, above all, the very powerful though isolationist United States. While the American Republic had the capacity to bring down the world's financial and trading system after 1929, it had no appetite for helping to uphold the postwar territorial changes. And when the global economy collapsed, well, who in their right minds would turn to armaments and war instead of retrenchment and looking after the home front? The democracies wouldn't; the resentful nations would.

And when the revisionist powers moved, they moved slowly and often appealed to precedents established by the status quo nations. In Manchuria, the Japanese were walloping the Chinese for the attacks (sic) on their railways. But had the British not done a similar thing when they sent a large force to Shanghai in 1926 in response to attacks on their settlements and missions there? Yes, Mussolini was altering the border between Italian Somaliland and Ethiopia when his troops invaded and finally took control of Addis Ababa in 1936. But that was something a French foreign minister like Pierre Laval understood all too well, since shifting colonial borders was an age-old game. One of Hitler's first foreign-policy acts was to offer a friendship treaty with Poland; and, a year later, to agree to an Anglo-German naval-limitations treaty. Here was a guy you could deal with. The 1935 Saarland plebiscite showed the inhabitants baying for a return to the Fatherland. The demilitarized Rhineland was merely "Germany's backyard," so who would contest its reintegration? The 1938 Anschluss with Austria was simply Germans joining Germans. The Sudetenland was predominantly German speaking and hadn't the great Woodrow Wilson himself pushed the principle of national self-determination? These forceful actions were disconcerting indeed, but when exactly did things reach a point where a leader wanted to take his own country into another great war, and for distant objects? The French were paralyzed, like a rabbit before a stoat. The British government was hopelessly unresolved. The Americans? Apathetic.

Even when the Fascist revisionist moves continued and the League of Nations was fully discredited, and the awful prospect of military conflict at last entered the minds of Western politicians, there was still much cause for procrastination. To begin with, fighting Germany, Japan and Italy all at the same time would be folly. But if you were going to stand and fight one of the aggressors, it probably became more pressing to placate the other two. As has been pointed out in many newer studies, the legendary and clear-cut divide between cringing appeasers and stalwart anti-appeasers does not seem to exist in the British and French official memoranda and private papers. A politician wishing to stand firmer against Germany was all too often inclined to want to keep on good terms with Italy. British navalists and imperialists who sought a sturdy defense of their Far Eastern possessions were hoping that Hitler would stay still

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or, perhaps better yet, turn eastward against the equally detestable Soviet Union. French statesmen, by contrast, were extremely fearful that Britain would concentrate on East Asia and thus pay less attention to Central and Western Europe. And those were just the conflicting opinions of the policy makers. Behind them, in the very troubled and class-torn democracies, were publics strongly opposed to fighting anywhere, trade unions who threatened to strike against war and center-left parties still opposing defense increases.

In this confused circumstance, the professional officials in the corridors of power—the Treasury, the defense chiefs, the colonial and trade offices—played a very large part indeed (too large a role, some historians have argued). The finance ministries of Britain and France repeatedly pointed out that their economies were virtually bankrupt from the paralysis of trade, investment and growth; that U.S. neutrality legislation forbade borrowing from across the Atlantic as they had in 1914–1918; and that deficit spending (to pay for an armaments buildup) would lead to a massive run on their currencies. The British Chiefs of Staff, for their part—“Cassandras in gold braid,” English military historian Correlli Barnett once called them—pointed out again and again that the army was overstretched across the world (Egypt, Palestine, India, Hong Kong) and had no modern equipment for a European war, that the Royal Navy couldn’t be in three theaters at once, that the purportedly great bases of the Empire were all horribly unprotected, and, the most important weakness of all, that the Royal Air Force (RAF) had fallen well behind the strength of the intimidating, modern Luftwaffe, with its capacity to deal devastating blows from the air. The Dominions Office warned that Canada and South Africa would not join a fight, and the India Office appealed for reinforcements in the Raj to stave off a simmering independence movement. This was what Neville Chamberlain needed to persuade his worried cabinet that they had to continue to give peace another try.

Detailed retrospective analyses, especially those looking at the equally worried memoranda composed by the German and Italian chiefs at the time, suggest these strategic assessments were too gloomy. Not much could be done in the Far East, but the Royal Navy could easily have handled the German and Italian fleets. The British Army in Egypt was far harder hitting than the large, unmodernized Italian armies of Tunisia. And if RAF Bomber Command could hardly reach German cities, no one should have imagined that the Luftwaffe of 1937 or 1938 could do much damage over England. As happens so often in History, the defense planners had that tendency to point to their armed forces’ own many weaknesses, but assumed that the enemies’ battalions were perfect and ready to fight. Civilian ministers certainly did not have the confidence to go against their own military experts.

But even all this, understandable though it appears, does not get us to the basic problem, which is one of political and ideological understanding: when do you know that the revisionist state is never going to be appeased by small-scale, or even middle-size, concessions? When do you know that Hitler is not like the Weimar-era Stresemann, nor Mussolini like the supple Foreign

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Minister Ciano? When do you know that these dictators' appetites are never going to be fully sated by compromises within the existing international system? When do you say to yourself, "This guy can only be stopped by the threat of serious armed force and, most probably, having to use that force"? How do you know that the concession you just reluctantly made was not the last one needed? After all, Hitler assured the West that acquiring the Sudetenland was his final objective. Was it? By late 1938, Churchill was arguing that appeasement was just feeding a crocodile with smaller and smaller tidbits until it finally turned on you, and many Britons were at last beginning to agree and wanted stiffer actions. But it really wasn't until Hitler's March 1939 conquest of the rump state of Czechoslovakia—breaking his Munich promises and seizing a country without any Germans in it—that the die was cast. By the time of his move against Poland six months later, appeasement was finished, and within a year of fighting, the Appeasers, the "guilty men," were to be execrated for the rest of time. No wonder that policy became the greatest insult you could throw at any later political opponent.

SINCE THEN, the various occasions on which the words Appeaser and Appeasement have been used are as countless as the stars in the sky; this poisonous term can be thrown about, from town-hall meetings, to union wage negotiations, to handling IMF conditionality offers, at all levels.

So, the broader question remains: can one distinguish between a "good" appeasement policy and a "bad" one? When the British cabinet, after very considerable debate between the pertinent ministers and their highest officials, decided to give way to Washington on the matters of Venezuela, the isthmian canal, the Alaska border—all very clear examples of "appeasement"—were they not good moves? Every one was a surrender, yet such concessions were going to help forge the famous Anglo-American "rapprochement" of the coming twentieth century. And that conclusion is not only wisdom in retrospect, but it is what senior officials like Arthur Balfour (prime minister), Joseph Chamberlain (secretary of state for the colonies), Lord Lansdowne (foreign secretary) and Edward Grey (opposition spokesman on foreign policy and later Liberal foreign secretary) argued at the time. It is sometimes very smart to step back. Yet consider a different possibility. What if the more rabid American expansionists had succeeded in their push to acquire Canada (a curious idea, I know, but some did argue that), and/or to seize British possessions like Bermuda, Jamaica, Trinidad and the rest? The result would have been to force London's hand into war—and, without a doubt, to cause many British commentators to conclude that the earlier concessions over the canal and the Alaskan border were a folly, merely encouraging the Yankee appetite.

Certainty about such matters only comes, I suspect, with hindsight; and there we are all wise, because we know what happened. It was wise, we now know, for the English to give up Calais to France in 1558 because they would no longer be tied to the Continent. It was wise for Stalin to stay on reasonable terms with the Japanese during the 1930s and early 1940s because he

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couldn't afford a Far Eastern war while Nazi Germany was preparing to blast its own way eastward. It was wise, clearly, for then-President Charles de Gaulle to extricate France from the Algerian bloodbath in the early 1960s—though “clearly” was not a word used by the French nationalists who sought to assassinate the general. It was wise, very wise, not to go to nuclear war over the Korean, Hungarian, Berlin and Cuban crises. It was wise, we can now see, for the United States to abandon the colossal encumbrance of Vietnam.

THE IMPLICATIONS—not conclusions—of all the above for current American world policies should by now be becoming clear.

America must come to grips with its place in the world as the twenty-first century unfolds and the strategic landscape alters. This great hegemon, like all who have preceded it in that role, cannot escape the constraints of history and geography. Its culture, ideology and domestic politics mean that it can never become Alexandrian, Roman or Napoleonic. Yet its sheer size—the very footprint that the United States places upon our planet—also means that it cannot occupy the small niche that, say, the Norways and New Zealands of the world enjoy: noninterventionist, nonimperial, prosperous and self-satisfied, carrying limited liabilities. Some years ago, Princeton political scientist Aaron Friedberg wrote a rather wonderful book entitled *The Weary Titan* (Princeton University Press, 1989). It was about how a worried Great Britain began to come to terms with the changing world order around 1900, including its concessions to America, but it really was a subtle plea for Washington to make a cold-blooded assessment of how many overseas commitments it could sustain over the long haul. Friedberg's choice of title was extraordinarily clever; it referred to an appeal made by that dynamic Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain to the Dominions in 1902. His speech urged them to share some of the military burdens of the home country, which had now become like a “Weary Titan stagger[ing] under the too vast orb of its fate.”

Friedberg was clearly too early in his musings. This is not a country which is comfortable with being compared to earlier great powers and empires; the curse of American exceptionalism—“this time it is different”—is too strong here. Statesmen who suggest caution or retrenchment like, say, George Kennan, get ignored; they are deeply respected for their erudition (so it is said), but ignored nevertheless. Even when staunchly conservative figures argue for a hard-nosed appraisal and prioritization of this country's overseas obligations, they are duly thanked but little else happens. In 1988, Friedberg's Harvard *doktorvater* Samuel Huntington tried his hand at describing America's global strategic situation, in very Eyre Crowe language (harking back to that great turn-of-the-twentieth-century German expert in the British Foreign Office), via a blue-ribbon commission which sent a report to the Reagan White House entitled “Discriminate Deterrence.” This report said many robust and reassuring things, though it did warn of defense weaknesses that needed to be addressed, but its chief remark—one of

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staggering importance—seemed to fall upon deaf ears. And it was this. For the whole of the nineteenth century, the young Republic had been shielded from the world's great-power troubles by the Royal Navy's monopoly of the Atlantic routes. And for the first half of the twentieth century, America had enjoyed the privilege of being always the last to enter the great wars; always two to three years late, with the massive economic and military benefits that such tardiness brought. Since 1945, however, the country's strategic disposition had been completely reversed. Its own troops were now, like Kipling's subalterns and corporals, out on the borders, this time in the DMZ, in Berlin, in the Fulda Gap, in Okinawa and along ever more frontiers of insecurity as the Cold War unfolded. This is not a condition which George Washington could have recognized. Even Teddy Roosevelt might have been amazed. But that is where we are.

This is not a situation that can or will last forever. This privileged nation—one is tempted to say, overprivileged nation—possesses around 4.6 percent of the world's population, produces about a fifth of world product, and is, amazingly, willing to spend over 40 percent of all the globe's defense expenditures. At some time in the future, sooner or later, there is going to be what economists call a "convergence," that is, we are going to have to trim our sails and no longer try to bestride the world like a colossus. As we do so, we shall make a concession here, a concession there, though hopefully it will be disguised in the form of policies such as "power sharing" and "mutual compromise," and the dreadful "A" word will not appear.

AMID THE thicket of other serious international challenges (possible collapse of much of Mexico, constant Russian nibblings to restore its imperial sway, the Iranian nuclear issue, the lunatic regime in North Korea), how to handle the rise of China as a strategic presence, first of all in East Asia and the western Pacific, then, later, across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, stands above all.

China is expanding onto the world stage as its relative share of global material strength steadily increases. It is following the path of many earlier fast-growing nations, and not unmindful of their histories. Political scientists of the realist school like to divide countries within the international system into either "revisionist" states or "status quo" powers. Viewed through this lens, the PRC is clearly revisionist and the United States clearly in favor of seeing the Asian status quo maintained—not unlike, obviously, that British position toward the Western Hemisphere one hundred years ago. Hegemons always prefer History to freeze, right there, and forever. History, unfortunately, has a habit of wandering off all on its own.

Here again, rather niftily, the relevance of the British appeasement debate of the 1930s (and thus the whole moral and political issue of when and where and how appeasement should be carried out—if it should be at all) becomes clear. How, actually, will the United States handle a

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rising China? Will the Chinese leadership, which has been reasonable and discreet so far (unless one stands on those bunions like Tibet and Taiwan), become more assertive as its economic heft increases and its armed forces modernize? What is one to make of its push toward Africa and the Persian Gulf, with its accompanying “string of pearls” naval and air bases? Crudely put, is this a Bismarckian China, which will expand so far, then rest content within its newly reshaped boundaries? Or a Wilhelmine China, which is bent, cautiously at first, then ever more assertively, upon its own version of Weltpolitik? And who can tell? Do the Chinese leaders even know? When Sir Eyre Crowe was asked to assess where Kaiser Wilhelm’s hyperactive Second Reich was headed, he concluded that either it was expanding in an unplanned, clumsy way, like a schoolboy growing out of his britches, or there was a purposeful plan to end British naval and imperial predominance. Either way, Crowe argued, it would be wise to remain diplomatically polite toward Germany, but to keep one’s powder dry and increase the fleet. Right now, the best U.S. “China policy” might be diplomatic engagement while simultaneously laying down another dozen supersmart attack submarines. No need to make a fuss about the latter. Beijing will get the message. It has enough spies and analysts in this country, after all.

We will remain extraordinarily influential, and with an unrivaled capacity to push hard military force outward—of that there is no doubt. As to a rising China becoming the new global hegemon, I have the most serious doubts; its internal weaknesses are immense, and, externally, it is likely to trip over its shoelaces, just as did Wilhelmine Germany. Simply because America has to adjust to a changing world order does not mean that it is coming close to collapse, or cannot leverage its many strengths, given smart policies at the White House (a big “given”). Recently, my distinguished Harvard colleague Niall Ferguson argued that, when America’s collapse comes, it will be fast, and decisive. I could not disagree more. Great empires, or hegemons, or number-one powers (whichever term one prefers) rarely if ever crash in some swift, spectacular way. Rather, they slide slowly downhill, trying to avoid collisions, dodging rising obstacles, making an offering here and there, ever searching for a flatter, calmer landscape. And they often lasted so long—for how many centuries, one has to ask, were the Ottomans and Manchus in “decline”?—because they offered concessions to others, which is a polite way of saying that they appeased. It is not a crime, or a moral failing, to recognize where and when it may be best to withdraw from a battlefield and to reduce a commitment. Most great statesmen have done that.

And one suspects that though there is no sign—yet—that Washington is thinking of leaving Afghanistan, it would be surprising to me if someone in the NSC or State Department hadn’t been secretly charged with devising some get-us-out-slowly-but-steadily stratagems. That’s what foreign offices are for after all—to get their governments off the hook. Only, please, make sure it can’t be labeled “Appeasement.”

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THE AFGHANISTAN-Pakistan entanglement is an issue so vexed and complicated that it would have tested the wisdom of the greatest leaders and strategists of the past. It is not totally fanciful to imagine Augustus, William Pitt the Elder, Bismarck or George Marshall pondering over a map which detailed the lands that stretch from the Bekaa Valley to the Khyber Pass. None of them would have liked what they saw. Probably all of them would have concluded that they were facing that grimmest of dilemmas: “heads, you lose; tails, you don’t win.” The distances, the awful topography, the willingness of the other side to accept appalling casualty rates, make a limited war—a finely calibrated war—something of a nonsense. “Can we win in Afghanistan?” I am often asked. And I reply, “Oh, sure. Just take the modern equivalent of those two million GIs who landed in Normandy, and station them in every Afghan village.” But we won’t do that. I don’t think I am alone in harboring this sense of unease, nor do I think it is a particularly left-wing feeling. When I listen, privately, to my former Yale students who have come back from fighting along the front lines, I discover that they think we can’t win—at least not “win” in the sense that knee-jerk congressmen and rabid Murdoch newspapers understand that word, a victory grotesquely skewed by their habit of invoking American football language: smash, overrun, crush, annihilate. This is a fantasy world. As one of my U.S. Marine former students ruefully commented, the most popular saying among the Afghan tribesmen is: “The Americans have the watches, but we have the time.” Not for nothing has Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War* (especially its chapters on the Sicilian expedition) become a book for U.S. officers to read again and again.

And yet, what if one did pull out, scuttle, appease? After all, we would not be the first to leave those wretched mountains and their defiant tribes to their own devices; indeed, we would simply join that long list of former occupation armies which eventually thought the better of it and made for the exit. And if there is anyone in Washington who feels that our troops should stay forever, surging here and surging there, because it is emotionally too upsetting to think of pulling back, then that person should be voted out of office; high emotions and proper realpolitik rarely go well together. As three-time British Prime Minister and four-time Foreign Secretary Lord Salisbury once observed, nothing is more fatal to a wise strategy than clinging to the carcasses of dead policies. Yet few administrations have the resolve to let go; and frankly, in the case of Afghanistan, a mushy compromise—half-concealed withdrawal—might be the least-worst way to go, at least for now. But not forever.

LIKE IT or not, American policy makers, pundits, strategists and high-level military officers cannot avoid the Appeasement story. Frankly, the tale of Britain’s dilemma during the 1930s is still far too close. Here was and is the world’s hegemon, with commitments all over the globe but also with pressing financial and social needs at home, with armed forces being worn out by continuous combat, with an array of evolving types of enemies, yet also facing recognizable and expanding newer nations bearing lots of increasingly sophisticated weaponry. So, what do you do: Appease, or not appease? Appease here, but not there? Declare some parts of the globe no longer of vital interest?

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And, yes, there comes a time when you have to stand and fight; to draw a line in the sand; to say that you will not step backward. As did Great Britain in September 1939. But those British and Commonwealth citizens fought the war with such fortitude and gallantry because, one suspects, they knew that their successive administrations had tried, so often, to preserve the peace, to avoid another vast slaughter and to offer fair compromises. After the German attack on Poland, appeasement vanished. And rightly so. Now the gloves were off.

However the American Republic advances through the decades to come, bearing with it so many advantages as well as serious shortcomings, it probably will have to face this key issue of adjusting to a twenty-first-century world order in which it plays a smaller role than it did in the one before. And as the incumbents of the White House and the Congress grapple with the problems of altering their country's global role, they will undoubtedly come face-to-face with that ugly political word: "Appeasement."

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